

Neglect at the Archives *Part 5/1/98*

CAN THIS administration outdo itself in the staging of ludicrous spectacles in place of what should be straightforward midlevel appointments? Consider the long-running melodrama over filling the job of national archivist, vacant since February 1993. That's when the trouble-plagued incumbent, Don Wilson, stepped down amid a hail of complaints about management and a special arrangement he had signed concerning the papers of then-President Bush. Two years and three months later, the president on Friday formally nominated John W. Carlin, a former Kansas governor and early Clinton campaign worker, whose appointment is fiercely opposed by historian and archivist groups. They say Mr. Carlin lacks any expertise or credentials in the field, as well as the political independence from the president called for by law, and they pledge to "pull out all the stops" to oppose his confirmation.

The all-but-guaranteed result: A messy Hill fight, with academic and scholarly politics mixed in, over a post that was said from the first to demand specifically someone professional and nonpartisan. The archivist oversees important issues of governmental integrity and continuity—significantly including the disposition and/or release of the president's own papers—and Mr. Clinton, whose relative youth makes him a president with perhaps heightened interest in the post-presidential disposition of his papers, has all the more reason to respect that independence and not appear to be cramping it.

Before he even took office, members of Mr. Clinton's transition team had been quietly advised that matters at the National Archives and Records Administration were "a mess"—a scorching Senate report had just publicly concluded as much—and that the best way to clean things up would be to replace the trouble-plagued

incumbent with a competent outsider, quickly and quietly, without creating an issue. No such luck. The names of at least four prominent scholars and university administrators were dropped on the basis of mild opposition from various quarters; so was the possibility of elevating the acting archivist, Trudy Peterson, has had uphill work dealing with the problems Mr. Wilson left behind. When a year ago the president skipped a dedication ceremony of the new Archives II facility in Maryland, drawing speculation that he was embarrassed to attend the ceremony without announcing an archivist, the White House claimed a name was imminent, but none appeared.

None of the previous choices has been opposed as hotly as Mr. Carlin, who, however, has the needed support of fellow Kansan Bob Dole on the Hill. For all we know, Mr. Carlin, a seasoned ex-governor, could make a competent national archivist, though the wisdom of his nomination is not exactly apparent, and if it exists remains to be demonstrated in the hearings. The trouble isn't Mr. Carlin, but the search, which has displayed all the hallmarks of the bizarre White House personnel operation, from excessive shopping around of candidates to apparent inability to say no to any interest group's complaint—or yes to a candidate who draws such a complaint from almost anybody. Another hallmark is the humiliation of respected candidates through waffling; at least two potential archivists believed they had been promised the nomination and had to be told by third parties, not even White House personnel, that the search had moved on. The problem here goes beyond boorishness to apparent unconcern for the health of a major government agency and the keeper of the nation's most important records.